



The Multiple Faces of Islamic Education in a Secular Age

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The Multiple Faces of Islamic Education in a Secular Age

Malika Zeghal

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Education in the Muslim world today is shaped in part by a history of modern contentions and debates around the respective definitions, values and roles of “secular” and “religious” knowledge. Theories of modernization make economic and political development contingent on the expansion of secular education and the corresponding reform and/or marginalization of religious education. In the 20th century, secular mass education has developed at a rapid rate in Muslim majority countries as part of socio economic development projects, albeit at different rhythms and through a diversity of national systems of education. Under the regulating power of the modern state, these national systems have developed compulsory primary and secondary education that has improved literacy rates for boys and girls, although disparities between countries can remain wide (Afghanistan vs. Tunisia for instance) and gender differences remain

significant in most countries. In general, these systems have provided massive access to education, not only at the level of primary and secondary education, but also at the university level.

Up until the last decade of the 20th century, there has been a tendency to analyze the evolution of educational systems in the Muslim world in terms of the diminishing importance of religious education. However, a recent renewal of scholarly interest has shown that religious education has remained significant and has in many cases thrived, in both the public and private sectors. Religious education in contemporary Muslim majority countries takes a variety of forms: from the traditional *madrāsas* (literally: “place of study”), also called the *ḥawza ‘ilmiyya* (an “enclosure” devoted to knowledge, or a community of knowledge) in the Shi‘i context, to the religious education imparted in private or public schools within an otherwise secular curriculum, and to the one-on-one teaching relationship between master and disciple in *tariqas* (mystical structures of authority and worship). The respective roles of secular and religious education in Muslim majority societies, as well as their interaction, depend on these societies’ specific histories of nation building. Internal debates concerning education are usually embedded in discussions about national identity and religion. In particular, the place that Islam as a scriptural tradition and a set of sentiments and embodied practices plays in the institutions of education must be understood in combination with an examination of the extent and forms of regulation of education by state authorities.

The chapter will show that western influences and colonization, together with state regulation of education, produced new forms of knowledge deemed more essential and efficient for social and economic development. These new forms of knowledge deeply transformed the modes of transmission of religious knowledge and the relationship between education and religion.

To better understand these dynamics in the contemporary Muslim world, one must first understand the general patterns of education in pre modern times. After a brief review of pre modern education, the chapter will examine how modern conceptions and practices of “religious education” evolved in the 19th and 20th centuries alongside the development of secular mass education, which encroached upon older forms of transmission of knowledge centered on the Islamic tradition. The sheer diversity and number of cases that have been treated in the secondary literature does not allow for a comprehensive review. Therefore, the author of this

chapter has made the choice of concentrating on a few cases and favoring comparisons and conceptualization over a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

The Notion of Education in the Islamic tradition: the Pre-modern Context

The Islamic tradition gives a central role to knowledge, or *‘ilm* in Arabic, and with it the one who searches for knowledge (*ṭālib al-‘ilm*) as well as those who possess knowledge and disseminate it: the scholars (*‘ulamā* or “those who know”). As Franz Rosenthal wrote: “... *‘ilm* is one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civilization its distinctive shape and complexion. In fact, there is no other concept that has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as *‘ilm*.” (Rosenthal, 2007:2) The categories of learning (*ta‘allum*) and teaching (*ta‘līm*) are crucial parts of the conceptualization of Islamic knowledge, be it the knowledge of God, the afterlife (*ākhirā*) or this life (*dunyā*). The search for knowledge and its transmission are often said to be related to the discovery or deepening of one’s faith, and studying is considered a form of worship. In the Koran, God is the all knowing (*‘alīm*), and true knowledge of the worlds seen and unseen is the primary knowledge that God has. However, numerous hadiths underline the value that knowledge holds for humans as well, and describe the search for knowledge as a duty that produces rewards both in this life and in the hereafter. One should seek knowledge as far as China, to paraphrase a well known hadith. The *‘ulamā* hold a high status, and are often described as the inheritors of the prophets (*warathat al-anbiyā*).

In his *Fatīḥat al-‘ulūm*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), who reflected in diverse ways on questions of pedagogies and education, describes knowledge as a truly human endeavor, as an art and a profession (*ṣinā‘a*) that can be classified according to the types of knowledge: what is known from the prophecy, what is known through reason (arithmetics), experimentation (medicine), or hearing (language); knowledge is also classified through a hierarchy of moral intentions and their inter-relations. While the higher forms of knowledge were the domain of a small literate elite in pre modern Muslim societies, “knowledge of practices and action” (*‘ilm mu‘āmalāt*) was incumbent upon each individual Muslim as a set of guidelines for virtuous behavior. The highest forms of learning in medieval times were that of the Koranic text, the study of hadiths, and the study of the law, in particular through the concept of *fiqh*, which refers

to the process of “understanding” (*faqaha*) and to the set of juridical instantiations of the sharia (Berkey 1992).

These different kinds of knowledge are closely interrelated, but developed at different times as institutionalized pedagogical domains. In particular, the development of the madrasa in the 11th century became institutionalized as the science of law became a central intellectual endeavor. George Makdisi distinguishes between three periods of development of institutions of learning, from the mosque to the madrasa. The madrasa was “the institution of learning par excellence,” since it was devoted primarily to the study of Islamic law, queen of the Islamic sciences” (Makdisi 1981: 9). As early as prophetic times, the learning circle (the *ḥalaqa*) in mosques was the locus for transmission of knowledge, and the *kuttāb* (the place of writing) developed in the first century of Islam as the place where elementary instruction was dispensed, often in a space adjacent to the mosque (Kadi 2006: 313). The emergence of the mosque-hostel-college took place later, between the 10th and the 11th century, “at least a hundred years before their Western counterparts, the European universities.” (Mottahedeh 1985 :89) They taught Islamic sciences – which were intended to foster the study of Islamic religious law- through a professional body of teachers, and were equipped with a structure for lodging their students. Their styles of teaching and contents have always been diverse and related to their context, as well as to interpretive traditions. For instance, the identity of the Shi’i *ḥawza* is grounded in the *disputatio*. Madrasas and *ḥawza*-s were most of the time sustained by a waqf deed and therefore by individual or family patronage that could also be linked to the world of politics. Sultans, vizirs and powerful elites as well as wealthy benefactors founded madrasas. Among them were some women, as in the case of the foundation of the Qarawiyyin of Fez in Morocco in 859 by Fatima al-Fihri, the educated daughter of a wealthy merchant. The madrasa was a central institution that mirrored the power of its founders through the reputation of its teachers and scholars, its architecture, its library, and all other elements that formed this institutional complex. Because deeds of endowments allowed the founders to specify the domains of instruction, the curricula of madrasas could vary. There was, however, a definite focus on the Islamic sciences. Other types of knowledge, such as Greek works, circulated in private homes and libraries or in the case of medical knowledge, in hospitals. In general, pre-modern Islamicate civilizations “made room for the efflorescence of the secular in the midst of the religious.” (Kadi 2006: 312). However, the division between sciences was not rigid and did not reflect the existence of two entirely autonomous and separate worlds, the religious and the secular. For instance, philosophy could

be taught by some ulama under the rubric of hadith, as well as outside of the official curriculum (Makdisi 1981: 77-80).

These places for the transmission of knowledge catered to an elite of educated men, and more rarely women, and had different outlooks depending on the place and time. Jonathan Berkey has documented the extraordinary vitality of Muslim education in medieval Cairo and showed that Muslim education was as much an “informal affair” and a “dynamic network” as it was an institutional endeavor (Berkey 1992: 17, 20). Interpersonal instruction played a crucial role, in particular through the master-disciple relationship and the delivery of the *ijāza*, the written document that the master issued to his student to certify that he had transmitted to the student a number of prophetic traditions or that the student had studied a certain number of works under his tutelage.

The Rupture of Modern Times: The Distinction Between Secular and Religious Knowledge

In modern times, factors such as western influence, direct occupation by foreign nation-states, or projects of broad social reform sustained by indigeneous elites led to an institutionalized dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge. It became an objectified division, which was sustained by the birth of the new systems of education that gave priority to “modern sciences” (*al-‘ulūm al-ḥadītha*) over religious knowledge. This new polarity led to tensions between traditional elites who taught in madrasas and representatives of the new educational institutions inspired by western models. These tensions unsettled the authority and legitimacy of the traditional carriers of knowledge, and translated at the moral, social and political levels. Under the pressure of European colonialism and under the influences of Western cultures, the existing networks of transmission of knowledge underwent a deep transformation that many historians have analyzed as a general decline of Islamic education, leading to its marginalization relative to newly emerging institutions of secular knowledge (Keddie 1972, Sayyid-Marsot 1972, Delanoue 1982). This process of marginalization is well documented, but more historical research would need to be done to understand the effects of the encroachment of secular education upon madrasa education on previous conceptions of knowledge and pedagogy. 19th century educators and intellectuals produced new narratives on education and underlined the need to reform it. Their diagnosis was that religious education was in decline and was becoming

archaic in the context of the sweeping changes taking place in their societies. However, too much attention given to this paradigm of decline has obscured the transformations that took place more deeply in the epistemology of religious learning. The reformers' diagnosis disparaged what they evaluated as archaic methods in religious education and the incompetence they saw in most of the madrasa teachers (Hourani 1962). This added to the critiques articulated by representatives of the colonizing powers, and produced an extremely negative picture of the state of the madrasas that had also declined economically by the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century.

Reforming Education: Bringing Islam into the World

The modern reformers saw educational institutions as a channel to revitalize Islam within their broader projects of social and political reforms. Education was often crucial in reformist ideologies, because it was conceived as a pivotal instrument for change. As part of a project to revitalize and strengthen Islam by making it more relevant, reforms of the old madrasa system showed a desire to bring the sciences of religion (*‘ulūm al-dīn*) closer to this world (*al-dunyā*) and to life (*al-ḥayāt*). Reform was meant to preserve Islamic education from decline, but not necessarily by isolating it from the influences of modern knowledge. Rather, since the aim was to endow religious knowledge with a new relevance for Muslims, reform had to make religious knowledge useful for life in this world, not only as correct practice, but also as sustaining knowledge of the secular world. This project of integrating religious knowledge with contemporary life implicated a transformation of the place of this knowledge in the general structures of teaching and learning and new conceptions of its transmission.

These reformist projects took different forms depending on the context. In India, for instance, where Muslims formed a minority, reformist ulama established new schools, such as the Farangi Mahall in Lucknow, in order to remedy the loss of patronage that came with the end of the Moghul Empire, and to preserve an Islamic heritage threatened by imperial assaults from the West. Schooling was based on the Dars I Nizami, a systematized curriculum that combined Arabic grammar, logic, philosophy, mathematics, rhetoric, fiqh and theology, and more marginally Koran and hadith (Metcalf 2005: 31). The British also established educational institutions, which combined features of the Muslim and British education systems, such as the Delhi College in 1825: there were an “English” track and an “Oriental” track, in which sciences

were taught in Urdu. The Delhi College became the model on which the ulama later rebuilt their institutions of learning, clearly inspiring the structures of the modern madrasa. Barbara Metcalf's study of the Indian madrasas underlines a depoliticization of the ulama after the mutiny of 1857 and their shift toward a focus on internal reform and education projects. In particular, the establishment of the school of Deoband in 1867, financed by the public rather than by the rulers or the system of waqfs, provided a structured institution of education independent from the state and from the waqf system, that re appropriated the Dars I Nizami with a special focus on hadith, in order to train future reformers. Standardized examinations, a library, and a physical separation from the mosque made this new structure self sufficient, explicitly institutionalizing education in a Muslim school that could efficiently cater to high numbers of students coming from all over the country.

A reverse process took place in the Ottoman state and its provinces in the 19th century. Whereas in India reforms of education sprung from the loss of state patronage, in Ottoman societies reform came from state-sponsored tanzimat, reflecting the new regulatory power of the modern state and announcing its authoritarian policies vis-à-vis education in general and religious education in particular.

During the 19th century, modern schools were established in the Ottoman provinces roughly following the model of the tanzimat. In general, these reforms were carried out by state authorities. These states were aiming to modernize their own administrations and produce new kinds of bureaucrats, as well as well trained officers for their armies. They implemented reforms outside of the traditional system of education by circumventing it, which led to a dichotomy between the traditional and modern systems of education. In Egypt, Khedive Muhammad Ali (1805-1849) and his successors opened up schools on the Western model. Schools training officers began opening in 1816, and a medical school was established in 1826. These schools contrasted with al-Azhar in both the form and the content of the knowledge transmitted. The new schools had a standardized curriculum and system of evaluation, organized according to the principles of western pedagogies and disciplines (Mitchell 1991), whereas al-Azhar's teaching did not. Al-Azhar's classes were not organized by age, often took place inside the mosque or in the teacher's home, and were not based on a standardized curriculum. Rote learning and memorization were the most frequently used methods of learning, and the modern subjects taught in the new schools were often absent from the body of knowledge transmitted at al-Azhar. This contrast informed the diagnosis made by 19th and 20th century Egyptian reformers

who criticized the state of studies in institutions such as al-Azhar. This narrative was built on the comparison of the traditional and modern systems and based on the new dichotomy that separated schools for modern knowledge (*‘ulūm ‘aṣriyya* or *ḥadītha*) and schools for religious knowledge. However, in the language of the reformers, this “modern” knowledge was not necessarily dubbed “secular,” or “a-religious,” but rather understood as “new” or belonging to the present times. It is also worth underlining that this separation was not so clear cut in practice. Schools that disseminated scientific knowledge often recruited their students from the *kuttabs* and from al-Azhar, which necessitated the recruitment of translators to translate into Arabic the teaching offered by foreign instructors. “Middle range” schools were also established that took their subjects of instruction from both systems, such as Dar al-Ulum in Cairo, created in 1872, and the Sadiki collège, created in 1875 in Tunis (Sraieb 1995). These middle range institutions transmitted religious knowledge, but in a way that explicitly differed from al-Azhar or the Zaytuna, even though they often recruited faculty from these traditional institutions. They taught a wider range of subjects than the traditional *madrāsas*, from literature, history, and geography to sciences and foreign languages, and competed with al-Azhar and the Zaytuna in terms of quality of instruction, range of topics covered, and job opportunities for their graduates. State-imposed reforms of al-Azhar in the last quarter of the 19th century therefore aimed at reorganizing its administration and at clearly defining the status of the teaching body to bring it on par with modern institutions. New subjects were also introduced at al-Azhar between the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, such as algebra, geography and history.

The Crucial Role of Religious Education in the Wider Reforms of Education

It was in this context that in 1895, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), a graduate of and former teacher at al-Azhar, was given the task of reforming education at the largest institution of education in Egypt at that time. Al-Azhar offered education from the elementary level of the *kuttāb* to the highest degree, the *‘ālimiyya*, which made its holder a scholar (*‘ālim*). His proposals for reform were often resented by his more conservative colleagues who accused him of wanting to transform al-Azhar into “a school of philosophy and literary education that fights religion and wants to extinguish its light” (Von Kukelgen 2011). Abduh articulated a harsh critique of the *ulama* and of the curriculum at al-Azhar. In particular, he denounced the rigidity (*jumūd*) of the *ulama* as well as their aversion for “the contemporary sciences” (*al-‘ulūm al-*

‘asriyya): “they gather their intellectual forces in order to focus on well known studies and ignore anything else to the point that it seems that they do not belong to this century and even worse: they do not belong to this world (*laysū min hādhihi al-dunyā*) (Rida, 1906-1931, vol. 1: 411). While Abduh and other reformers severely criticized the methods of learning at al-Azhar and in particular the refusal of the ulama to engage with the modern sciences, they did not reflect on the fact that the conservative ulama’s position against reform was also related to the ulama’s self-understanding as guardians of the Islamic tradition –a tradition which they perceived as threatened by modernization. They felt that engaging with the “contemporary sciences” carried the risk of marginalizing the tradition they were supposed to maintain and transmit.

This did not mean that Abduh and like-minded reformers were against the existence of religious education, but rather that they wanted to reform it in a way that would integrate all sciences, secular and religious, in order to maximize the benefits of education for Muslim students. For Abduh, this reform of education –in which religious instruction was central – was the channel through which society would be transformed and improved. Islam had to play a pivotal role in this reform. In a programmatic text dealing with the Nizamiyya primary and secondary schools in the Ottoman state, Abduh underlined that ignorance and immorality were tightly linked (Rida, 1906-1931, vol. 2: 505). In particular, he related what he saw as the catastrophic state of the Nizamiyya schools to the absence of religious education (*ta’līm dīnī*) and insisted on Quran education to be integrated in the curriculum: “the *qur’ān* is the secret of the success of Muslims.” (Rida, 1906-1931, vol. 1, 414). In the same vein, he explained desertions in the army by the absence of religious education in military schools (Rida, 1906-1931, vol. 1: 415). The reformist narratives hence developed a project of mutual integration of religious and secular education, lamenting their isolation in separate domains. For Abduh, religious instruction (*tarbiya* or *ta’līm*) was the basis of all education. If used as a foundation it would strengthen morality and favor reasoning, leading to the next phases of instruction in modern scientific knowledge (Von Kukelgen 2011). Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida had great confidence in the power of education as a tool to shape their societies: “a reform of society (*iṣlāḥ madanī*) based on the Koran and the sunna” was what Muslim societies needed (Rida 1906-1931, Vol. 1: 415).

The Loss of Legitimacy and the Transformation of Islamic Education

Debates about the legitimacy and the methods of reform separated reformist ulama at al-Azhar from those who refused to change their ways of teaching. These debates were not merely ideological, opposing modern to traditional conceptions of education. An important part of the ulama resisted the reforms because they saw these modernizing projects as an assault on their own institutions, on their function of preserving the Islamic tradition and hence on their own authority. These debates were also related to economic questions, such as the growing precariousness of graduates of traditional institutions of learning on the job market. Between the two World Wars, madrasa graduates could no longer compete with their counterparts from the modern schools. They were no longer forming the intellectual and professional elite of Egyptian society. Also, the emergence of political movements on a massive scale in the 20th century, such as the Wafd Party or the Muslim Brothers, did place the *effendis*, the urban middle class that had little to do with the madrasa type of education, at the forefront of politics. The ulama were being relegated to the periphery of Egyptian society, marginalized not only by the growing centrality of novel types of education, but also by emerging social and political movements.

It was in this context of a growing sense of marginalization among the ulama that the law of 1911 regulated the processes for application, examination, and granting of degrees at al-Azhar. The mode of transmission of knowledge became less individual. At al-Azhar in the first part of the 20th century, primary and secondary institutes, the *ma'had*-s, started to replace the kuttabs, where children used to learn in a circle sitting on the floor, often in the mosque or in the house of the master. The institutes copied the school in its modern form, with chairs, tables, and a blackboard, in a building expressly designated for education. At the higher education level, three domains of learning were compartmentalized in different schools (*kulliyāt*): Arabic Language, Sharia Law, Theology or “usūl al-dīn.” Al-Azhar progressively shifted to a modernized structure for the transmission of religious knowledge that severed its links to the sacred space of the mosque and introduced a new spatial order for teaching.

While the forms of the madrasa and the modern university converged, the kuttabs never disappeared and the *halaqa* (circle) as a form of transmission of knowledge did not cease to exist either. This speaks to the fact that while modernization transformed religious education in ways that somewhat severed its relation with the madrasa tradition, it also led to a diversity of forms of religious learning that persist to this day. In Egypt, North Africa or Lebanon (Mervin

2000), to give only a few examples, the structures for the transmission of religious knowledge became diverse, from the *kuttab*s, to more formal primary and secondary religious schools (the *madāris ‘atīqa* in Morocco or the *ma‘āhid azhariyya* in Egypt), to higher levels of education that cater to informal *ḥalaqāt* in mosques, to dissemination of knowledge within mystical communities, or to the modern university – such as the universities of Cairo and Damascus, which include schools of sharia. The hawzas of Najaf in Iraq and Qum in Iran are crucial locations of production and dissemination of Shi‘i Islamic knowledge, and play a political and social role beyond the mere transmission of knowledge.

The Transformation of Contents and the Expansion of Religious Education: A New Hybrid?

The transformation of Islamic schooling in the 20th century was not only one of forms and structures. The content of the knowledge transmitted and its presentation to students were also radically reshaped. For instance, changes to the legal system during the 19th century instigated curricular transformations in the domain of sharia. In the Arab world, the development of hybrid legal systems – based on European law but incorporating elements of the sharia – necessitated the training of lawyers and magistrates in Western positive law. New schools of law were created in the 19th century and the 20th century, such as the Khedive Ismail school of law in 1868, the school of judges founded in Cairo in 1907, the *Centres d’études juridiques* founded by the French in Tunis in 1922 and in Rabat and Casablanca in 1927, or the school of law of Beirut in 1912. As described by Monique Cardinal (Cardinal 2005), they taught positive law (*qānūn*) alongside sharia law, which led to the teaching of sharia in radically new forms.

In the new schools of law, the classical treatises and *fiqh* compendia that used to inculcate legal knowledge in the traditional madrasa were no longer required to be read in their entirety by the students. In the 20th century, new textbooks were written and published by scholars of sharia, themselves often graduates of traditional institutions, who specialized in teaching Islamic legal theory. These books mixed short excerpts from classical texts with concepts of positive law that became the framework for understanding legal theory. They also presented sharia in comparison with positive law, showing the possibility of a convergence between them (Cardinal 2005). This strategy might have been an attempt on the part of teachers of Islamic law to appeal to students in modern schools of law, as Cardinal has argued, but more fundamentally it was an

attempt to present the law in terms that kept its linkage with tradition in a context where Western law had become hegemonic – nearly the only system through which law was legible. This new framework offered concepts through which it became possible to construct law through a narrative that made it markedly “Islamic.” This integration of classical texts in textbooks that referred centrally to the vocabulary of Western positive law led to the fragmentation and marginalization of the classical tradition, as well as to a reinterpretation of sharia as “Islamic law” in comparison to positive law, or *qānūn*. This new narrative about Islamic law echoed and converged with the contemporaneous emergence of a vocabulary of political Islam that demanded the application of “Islamic law” and the foundation of an “Islamic state.”

The fragmentation and near-effacement of the classical legal treatises did not exclusively take place in the modern schools of law. It also happened in colleges of sharia within traditional institutions of religious education such as al-Azhar in Egypt, the Qarawiyyin in Morocco or the Zaytuna in Tunisia. For instance, after the reform of 1961 at al-Azhar, the college of sharia (*kulliyat al-sharīʿa*) became the college of “sharia and positive law” (*kulliyat al-sharīʿa waʿl-qānūn*) and modern textbooks introducing excerpts of the classical literature were used in the curriculum of the school.

This combination of two references of unequal status – the texts of the Islamic tradition embedded in the Western paradigms of legal theory – did not only emerge as the product of pedagogical agendas produced in the new textbooks. It also originated from the projects devised by the newly independent Egyptian state that was attempting, with more or less success, to directly engage with and regulate religious knowledge, in order to control the potential political challenge from undomesticated religious authorities. The perfect illustration of this engagement with institutions of religious knowledge was the authoritarian reform of al-Azhar by Nasser’s regime in 1961: law number 103 of 1961 made al-Azhar part of the administration of the state, reconfigured its administrative structure, and, most importantly for this argument, reformed the types of knowledge transmitted at al-Azhar. As a mosque (*jāmiʿ al-Azhar*), al-Azhar also officially gained the status of university (*jāmiʿat al-Azhar*). This echoed the status of Cairo University, which had been established in 1908 as the first Egyptian university. At the level of the primary and secondary institutes of al-Azhar, the curriculum was built on religious subjects as well as on the secular subjects taught in the system of public education. Young students acquired both types of knowledge and specialized afterwards in any of the schools of al-Azhar

University. At the university level, the three schools remained (Sharia and Positive Law, Arabic language, and Theology), representing a “religious center,” and new schools teaching secular subjects – from medicine to pharmacy, languages to biology – were built in the suburbs of Cairo, as well as in the provinces. The project reflected earlier reformist desires to integrate religious and secular knowledge in a way that would revitalize Islam and lead to the general progress of society. In that narrative, echoing Abduh’s earlier observations about the isolation of the ulama from the world around them, the carriers of religious knowledge had to be brought back into the world. The aim of the 1961 reforms was therefore to bring together religion and this world (*dīn wa dunyā*), and to make the ulama and their knowledge “useful.” The narratives justifying the 1961 reforms denied the ulama the status of “men of religion,” and insisted on the illegitimacy of a separation between the “science of religion” and the “science of this world,” arguing that religion could not be a “profession” (*hīrfa*) (Zeghal 1996).

This official narrative justifying the reform was deeply ambivalent, because it took a position defending “Islamic education” while at the same time diluting it with other subjects to preserve its relevance. The ulama understood this ambivalence very well. They resented such a representation, because it denied them their specialization in the tradition as a specific domain of teaching. Indeed, the reforms radically reconfigured the ulama as hybrids whose function was to bridge Islam and the world by becoming specialists of both domains. In fact, Nasser’s reform echoed the project of the Muslim Brothers by conjoining the two orders constituted by “religion” and the “world” (*dīn wa dunyā*).

The most immediate practical result of this state-imposed reform of the early 1960s was to expand al-Azhar as a university. This was reflected in the increase of the number of students in the 1970s and 1980s, which in turn led to the proletarianization of the university students. A significant number of ulama who taught in the religious schools at the university hence expressed the desire to see al-Azhar recover its unique specialization in religion. They complained that the expansion of their university through the addition of modern subjects had produced graduates who excel neither in the secular sciences nor in religious knowledge, and had strained the university’s resources (Zeghal 1996). The combination of religious and secular knowledge in various educational contexts also created a commonality of epistemological conditions and worldviews between graduates of public secular schools and graduates of al-Azhar, since all students have access to a blend of secular and religious knowledge.

Some scholars have argued that it was precisely this combination of religious and secular concepts in the context of mass education after the 1960s that led to the development of political Islam (Kepel 1985). While this assertion is difficult to verify, it is nonetheless important to underline that religious knowledge was not necessarily marginalized, but rather deeply transformed by its combination with secular knowledge. This combination helped sustain the claim by Islamist ideologues that all knowledge, and scientific knowledge in particular, could be attained through Islam, and that Islam could be the foundation of all domains of life. Deepening the idea that a combination of secular and religious knowledge led to ideologies of Islamism, Olivier Roy has argued that Islamist students were more represented in scientific departments in universities of the Muslim world in the last quarter of the 20th century than in other departments, precisely because they interpreted scientific knowledge as contained in the Islamic scriptures and verifiable through them (Roy 1990 and 1996). The correlation between types of education and politicization are, however, difficult to verify: political Islam's ideology seems to be as much present among the graduates of secular scientific education as it is among the graduates of religious education (Zeghal 1996).

The desire to return to purer "religious roots" was often expressed by the ulama of al-Azhar – and was even realized in part, when, within the Faculty of Islamic law and Positive Law, a program for the study of sharia was developed in the 1970s and a *kulliyat al-da'wa* (school for the call to Islam) was established within the millenarian *jāmi'* in the old center of Cairo. This desire is not to be interpreted as the expression of "Islamism" within an institution such as al-Azhar, but rather as a project to re center knowledge on the Islamic tradition, and to make it less affected by the pressures of having to conform to the rules and constraints of secular domains of knowledge. The projects to make al-Azhar conform more closely to the old madrasa system is also deeply linked to a desire for political independence from the state's administration. Projects to create a "private al-Azhar" under the Mubarak regime have been attempted unsuccessfully by some faculty members since the 1970s (Zeghal 1996). The aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian revolution might very well provide new opportunities to this enterprise of "liberation" of religious education from the grip of the state as well as from the constraints of secular "reform."

[IMAGE]

State Reforms and the Marginalization of Islamic Education

While the 1961 reform of al-Azhar was an attempt on the part of the Egyptian state to modernize and domesticate the university, it also paradoxically led to its expansion in terms of number of schools at all levels and in terms of number of students. This reflected the high demand of Egyptian families for religious education in the second part of the 20th century, as well as the use of al-Azhar by the government as a space in which to accommodate the overflow of high school graduates in search of a seat in a college. Al-Azhar's modern faculties in particular became the receptacle for lower performing high school graduates in the 1980s, leading to the transformation of al-Azhar into an institution for mass education.

However, in the Arab Middle East, not all post-colonial reforms led to such an expansion of the religious education sector. In Morocco, the monarchy neglected its madrasas for a long time, leading to the weakening of the teaching institution of the Qarawiyyin and the fragmentation of the networks of religious teaching into differentiated institutions (Eickelman 2007, Zeghal 2008).

In Tunisia, where state elites in the 1960s were strongly influenced by the Turkish model of secularism, state policies marginalized the traditional sector of education. The kuttabs were closed, along with the University of Zaytuna and its annexes in the provinces. Of the Zaytuna, only a small faculty of theology remained, which was integrated within the newly opened University of Letters of Tunis in 1960. While religious education remained in the curriculum in primary and secondary public schools under the name "religious and civic education" (*tarbiya dīniyya wa madaniyya*), at the higher level it was shrunk to a specialization until the Zaytuna was reinstated as a university in 1989. After 1989, President Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, faced with the expansion of the Islamist movement, undertook a radical reform of religious education. The textbooks for public schools were entirely rewritten under the authority of minister of Education Mohamed Charfi (Charfi 2009). The class of "religious and civic education" was divided into two separate classes: "religious education" and "civic education." The former was revamped to teach the basics of the tradition, as well as to transmit a modernist interpretation of the religious texts, presented in short excerpts. The latter insisted on the rationalist interpretation of reformist Islam in combination with texts from the European Enlightenment, in particular from the French tradition, transmitting the values of freedom and democracy. These new textbooks contrasted with previous teachings, which were more morally and politically conservative in tone and content. Because they inculcated human rights and

democratic values, they were also strongly at odds with the increasing authoritarianism of the regime.

This textbook reform originated from the conviction on the part of the Ben Ali regime that Islamist ideologies posed a threat to the Tunisian state and society. The regime was particularly concerned that graduates of the Zaytuna, who had been teaching religious and civic education in secondary schools, and were allegedly immersed in Islamist ideologies, had thereby helped expand the reach of the Islamist movement in the younger generation (Zeghal 2009). It was on this basis that the Ministry of Education undertook to reduce the number of graduates from the Zaytuna after 1989, and to prevent them from teaching civic education, relegating them to teaching “religious education” only. This reform illustrates the power/knowledge nexus that is at play in any reform of educational institutions, showing how the state elites' understanding of political dangers can lead them to reform education in form and content. However, it is difficult to evaluate its effects on the evolution of Islamist movements in Tunisia.

It can be argued, nonetheless, that the striking contrast between the content of the new textbooks and the political reality of Tunisia in the last two decades of the 20th century might shed significant light upon the revolutionary events of the winter 2010-2011 and the end of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. The youth who were at the forefront of the uprisings were the very products of the educative reforms started by Ben Ali's regime in 1989, which disseminated ideals of democracy and human rights. During fieldwork in the summer of 2011 in Tunis, I had a conversation with a civic education teacher in a secondary school in the suburbs of Tunis that illuminated the contrast between the textbooks and the political reality of authoritarianism. I asked her if and how she was able to teach the democratic values inscribed in the civic education textbooks to her students in the authoritarian context before the revolution. She answered: “In schools, the politics of oppression (*qam'*) was rampant, even at the kindergarten level. Teachers would let the students speak about the texts, those texts about human rights, democracy, pluralism, etc., but would remain silent on them. The students would ask questions, but I would not respond. I knew there were also spies among the students. They would say, ‘The teacher is afraid. My father is silent. My grand father is silent.’ This oppression has transformed bodies and minds into deprived bodies and minds (*maḥrūma*). Hence, the revolution was a revolution of bodies, not of reasons. And this is different from the revolution for our independence [the 1956 independence of Tunisia].” Her gripping analysis of the revolution and of her relationship with her young students reveals the tensions between a curriculum that expounded democratic

values, and the political reality of authoritarianism. In this context, the desire for political change could not find a channel to express itself other than in the street. It expressed itself through street demonstrations that demanded the fall of the government, without articulating a new and clear political project. While the textbook reform had been praised for its “modern” contents (Béji 1997), it only had an effect “by default” – that is, by demonstrating the absence in everyday life of the principles these textbooks articulated.

The Domestication of Islam and the Quest for Autonomy

Gregory Starrett has shown how religious education in Egyptian public schools “functionalized Islam,” and how state reformers made education a channel for policies of social integration through Western sociological ideologies of progress. Islam was hence transformed from a set of practices to a set of values that promoted good citizenship and discipline (Starrett 1998). As in Tunisia, religious education was harnessed by the Egyptian state as a channel for moral indoctrination in its fight against political Islam. Contrary to the Tunisian case, the Egyptian state’s strategy actually reinforced the Islamic “trend” in a context where printed and new media also deployed more content devoted to Islam in the last quarter of the 20th century. Within the secular structure of public education, Islam gained a new objectified form that made it an attainable object that could be implemented in different domains. It was particularly legible as a political resource, as articulated by the slogan “Islam is the solution” (*al-islām huwwa al-ḥall*). This might be why the Egyptian state introduced a civic and moral program in the public school curriculum in 2001-2002, separating religious from civic education as had been done in Tunisia in order to make Islam less “comprehensive” (Leirvik 2004, 233).

In contrast with the tight regulation and control of madrasa education in the Arab Sunni Muslim states, madrasa education in Pakistan, as well as in Iran and Irak have retained an important degree of independence from the state (Zaman 2002). For instance, in 20th century Iran, as in many countries of the Arab Middle East, the state extended control of the religious endowments, and the Iranian mullahs lost their administrative power over these sources of income even if they continued to finance the ḥawzas. More importantly and specific to many Shi’i madrasas, self-tithing financed the institutions of religious education, which ensured a certain level of independence in curricular choices. This contrasts greatly with the domestication of Sunni institutions of knowledge in the Arab world such as al-Azhar or the Zaytuna. As a consequence,

Roy Mottahedeh remarked: “In their own view the mullahs of Iran have kept a great tradition of learning alive in its pure form; in the view of their Iranian critics they have kept their curriculum hermetically sealed against the modern world.” (Mottahedeh 1985: 236) However, even in this case, this “hermetic sealing against the modern world” impinged on madrasa education, making it a more marked category, socially and politically, leading to the professionalization of religious specialists as well as to their politicization, as shown by the role of Khomeiny in the Iranian revolution of 1979. (Mottahedeh 1985: 237)

The Islamic Republic reinforced the role of Islamic education at all levels of the schooling system, but was not able to enforce control on the great seminary of Qom. However, this control was easier to impose on seminaries such as *jāmi‘at al-Zahra* in Qom, a female *hawza* established in 1985 by the Iranian government. Like all other madrasas, the *hawzas* are dependent on the historical contingencies of politics. After the Iranian revolution, the Iranian *hawzas* of Qom gained more influence and religious authority, while Najaf in Iraq declined due to the repressive policy of Saddam Husain. After the American invasion of 2003, the *hawzas* in Najaf regained more intellectual influence. Intellectual debates in the Shi‘i *hawzas* were particularly vigorous and creative in the early 21st century, in particular in Qom with the engagement of some of its religious authorities with the question of religion and politics, in opposition to Khomeiny’s doctrine of the *vilayat al-faqih*.

New Religious Authorities and the Expansion of Islamic Knowledge

The tensions between secular and religious education do not only express themselves at the level of state sponsored national educational reforms. They can also be found at more diffuse levels, as with the attempts that have been made since the 1970s to reverse the encroachment of secular knowledge on Islamic knowledge and to remove the dichotomy between these two domains by making all modern academic disciplines “Islamic.” Proponents of the Islamization of knowledge do not form a unified organization but rather operate in different countries of the Muslim world as well as in Europe and North America, either through universities or NGOs. A first conference to sustain the project was organized in Mecca in 1977, followed by other conferences around the Muslim world, and a book series called “Islamic education Series.” However, these efforts did not form a coherent and unified project, even if they sustained several individual careers (Abaza 2002). On the other hand, the proliferation of writings on Islam that inundated the book market

in the last part of the 20th century seems to have provided a diversified new supply of religious literature beyond formal curricula. This phenomenon is naturally related to the expansion of literacy and of mass education and to the growing access of Muslim populations to the written word. The old “yellow literature” (*al-kutub al-ṣafrā*) that used to circulate among narrow networks of scholars gave way to mass produced books about Islam, from the “pavement literature” (Gonzales-Quijano 1998) to more formal bookstores. The proliferation of booklets on devotional literature, the easy access to the Koran, as well as to all things “Islamic,” from political pamphlets to more classical literature, has sustained the expansion of a public immersed in diverse religious narratives.

The effects of the printed religious literature have been further augmented by the development of satellite television programs since the mid 1990s, as well as by the new media, websites in particular. The development of print and new media has radically changed the world of Islamic knowledge: religious knowledge circulates more easily, it can be shared among large groups, and in particular it can easily circumvent the state sponsored religious institutions. Thus religious knowledge can also be individually re appropriated, making it more open, freely used, and flexible. It has also become more fragmented, since religious authorities emerge in individualized forms.

Dale Eickelman has underlined that massive access to literacy has led to an “objectification” of Islam and to new forms of religious authority, that of modern Islamists in particular (Eickelman 1992b). At the same time, the fragmentation of religious authority has not led to the dilution of the social and symbolic capital that Islam has traditionally provided to intellectuals and educators (Eickelman 1985 and 1992a). In particular, scholarly religious authorities use new media in ways that promote the printed word and their own networks of transmission of ideas, often intersecting with the world of politics. Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, himself an Azharite established in Qatar and an opponent of the Mubarak regime, uses the network of Al-Jazeera television, as well as his own website, to promote his ideas and books. He has built a large international audience and readership. States also promote the scholarly authorities that support state-sponsored policies and ideologies. This sponsorship, even when coming from authoritarian regimes, is not necessarily an obstacle to publicity and to the building of a large readership, (as illustrated by the case of Saïd Ramadan al-Buti in Syria). This expanding world of self-styled religious authorities does not operate in a totally fluid and unconstrained way. Political and institutional constraints continue to shape this world, and allow only those who

master them to emerge as recognized authorities. Madrasas reinforce their own transnational influences through the new media. It is therefore important to underline that religious curricula in schools are only one source of religious instruction, and perhaps not the most important, in broader contemporary national and transnational contexts. States are hence pushed not only to regulate their own school curricula but also to articulate their own conceptions of Islam with the help of individual authorities and of their own religious institutions. In other words, they are prompted to operate as religious authorities themselves, in competition with non-state authorities, and they play a role in the “systematization and explicitness of religious tradition” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 39).

Islamic Education’s Reputation After 9/11

A lot of attention has also focused on Islamic education since September 11, 2001, as pundits often relate the development of radical forms of Islamism to madrasa indoctrination, in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in particular (NPR 2011). In Saudi Arabia, the public education curriculum is heavily devoted to Islam as a living and embodied practice, which also reflects the interpretative bent of Wahhabism. Western and Arab media have underlined links between the narratives of the Saudi religious curriculum and the emergence of a radical interpretation of Islam. Allegations of such a link led to Saudi projects of revision of the public schools' Islam textbooks. The madrasas of Pakistan also came under scrutiny after 2001, since many of the Taliban in Afghanistan had graduated from Deobandi madrasas. However, the interpretations of Islam developed in madrasas at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century vary enormously.

Islamist movements who aim to participate in legal politics and social work have been extremely attentive to education from their inception: for them, education in religious values will lead to the emergence of Muslim citizens and of an Islamic society. Their vision of education is therefore not only intended to provide religious instruction so that children can practice Islam properly, but also to express larger projects of social and political reform, not necessarily of a radical sort.

Islamic schools have also been developing in Muslim diasporas in the Western world, as sizable Muslim communities have settled there in the second half of the 20th century. Where they have

been authorized, they have usually started as “Sunday schools” in mosques and evolved into full fledged schools on the model of the Catholic parish. They offer a mix of secular and religious curricula. There are also different models for Islamic higher education in the West. Some institutions attempt to recreate traditional forms of religious education based on the teachings of the traditional legal schools and the material forms of the ḥalaqa – the Zaytuna institute in California, for instance – often to counter forms of instruction that are assumed to sustain radical interpretations of Islam, and that do not consider the Islamic tradition in its historical and cultural depth. In some countries, where there is mounting opposition to a growing visibility of Islamic communities, the establishment of Islamic schools has become a difficult enterprise. This is the case in France, where public authorities are reluctant to legalize and sponsor Islamic schools as they do for other religious schools (Bowen 2010). As a question for future research, it will also be important to evaluate the impact of students migrating within and beyond the Muslim world to enroll in Islamic studies on the madrasas and universities themselves.

Islamic education has had an important presence in modern times: it has taken various forms and has stood in various relations to secular education. It has also become a politicized domain, since states see it both as an important stake that impinges on the formation of their citizenry and as a political resource that helps them situate their own identity as “Islamic,” for instance in the way Islamic law is taught in universities or through religious and civic education in public schools. Islamic education is also a much contested domain, in which new actors, political and religious, expand their own symbolic and economic capital. Its modern forms are in tremendous debt both to the regulating power of the state and to the power of mass education, although these two phenomena are often in tension.

Summary

- The Islamic tradition gives a central role to knowledge and its dissemination. Since the 11th century, establishments for the dissemination of knowledge developed, with at their center the study of Islamic law and the sciences that it necessitated. Different patterns of education developed, and in pre-modern times education was mainly a flexible and informal enterprise.
- In modern times education in the Muslim world has been inhabited by a tension between two types of education: the secular and the religious. Competition and mutual influences

have marked the relationship between them. In particular, state led reforms of Islamic education have brought religious knowledge in close interaction with secular projects and made “Islam” a common object of knowledge for students at all levels.

- Islamic education in modern history is marked by the impact (or the lack thereof) of the political control of the state. Two main patterns have emerged: the madrasas that have protected their autonomy from their states and those who have been domesticated by state authorities. However, more generally, in both cases, a revitalization of institutions of religious knowledge marks the end of the 20th century and the early 21st century, and madrasas in the Muslim world have expanded numerically, helping absorb larger cohorts of students.
- The dissemination of secular knowledge, as well as new modes of dissemination such as the internet, are transforming the role and influence of madrasas. Migrations from and toward the Muslim world are also changing the makeup of the student population in Islamic institutions of education.
- In the end of the 20th century, madrasas have experienced a revitalization process and some of them are witnessing important political and intellectual debates that may have an impact on politics. The recent re emergence of madrasa as a significant institution playing political, educational and moral roles, should lead historians to explore further earlier tropes of “decline” and perhaps focus more on processes of reshaping of forms and contents of religious education rather than on tropes of decline and resurgence.

Discussion Points

- In what sense is knowledge significant in the history of the Islamic civilization? On what institutions was the dissemination of knowledge based?
- How did the religious systems of education transform in modern times? What problems did these changes create?
- How are states implicated in the reforms of religious education? Do religious education teachers accept state implication and control? What are the consequences of such a control?
- Under what conditions does religious education produce political radicalization?
- Does religious education favor socio-economic development?

Further Reading

Doumato, E. and Starrett, G., eds., 2007. *Teaching Islam. Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

This book examines the content and role of religious textbooks in a diverse sample of Middle Eastern countries, including Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

Heffner R. and Zaman M. Q., eds., 2007. *Schooling Islam. The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

This collection of essays explores the cultural and political role of Muslim education in the Muslim world. It is particularly useful to get a sense of the latest academic debates on the subject.

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